



## **Open Letter to Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State, Regarding Complicity in Genocide**

June 4, 2023

Dear Mr. Secretary,

On behalf of the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, a grassroots advocacy organization based in the U.S. dedicated to ending the cycle of violence and promoting long lasting peace, we write to you concerning the May 30th State Department's Press Statement on Continued Peace Talks Between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In that statement, the State Department expressed "appreciation for Prime Minister Pashinyan's commitment to peace," and welcomed "President Aliyev's recent remarks on consideration of amnesty." The State Department further says that "aggressive rhetoric can only perpetuate the violence of the past" and advocates for "constructive dialogue" that can "create peace, opportunity, and hope." The Lemkin Institute is concerned about the phrasing of this statement and finds it necessary to write this open letter not only to correct the record regarding Azerbaijan's culpability and responsibility, but also to warn of American complicity in ongoing genocidal policies if the US does not change course.

We wish to underscore that it is not Armenia's responsibility to conclude an agreement of peace, because Azerbaijan is the aggressor state in this scenario. With its recent statement, the State Department shifts the burden of making peace from the aggressor to the victim. Currently Azerbaijan is the only party engaging not just in aggressive rhetoric, but also in aggressive acts that risk perpetuating the violence of the past, including the Armenian genocide of 1915 to 1923, which was committed in the South Caucasus as well as in the Ottoman Empire and in which Azeri soldiers participated as allies of the Ottoman Empire and the forces of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Today President Aliyev, along with other Azerbaijani officials, routinely makes violent threats against both the Republic of Armenia and the Armenians of Artsakh. These threats include violating

the territorial sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia, calling for the removal of the legitimately elected representatives of Artsakh, and creating conditions to forcibly remove the Armenians of Artsakh from their ancestral homeland.

There is no reason to believe that Azerbaijan will respect any legal agreement it signs. While Armenia has respected the provisions of the 2020 Tripartite Ceasefire Agreement, Azerbaijan has routinely violated it. Most recently, on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, Azerbaijan erected an illegal checkpoint on the only road linking the Armenian enclave to the outside world. The illegal checkpoint joins Azerbaijan's March 2023 blockade of the Goris-Stepanakert highway and the December 2022 blockade of Lachin to ensure that the bare minimum of supplies get to the Armenians of Artsakh. Nearby routes have been heavily militarized, jeopardizing and therefore impeding the safe travel of civilians. Azerbaijan routinely fires on Armenian soldiers and civilians in Artsakh as well as in Armenia proper, and continues to invade the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia.

The Lemkin Institute wishes to remind the Honorable Secretary of State that both the blockade and the checkpoint are in violation of Point 6 of the 2020 Tripartite Agreement that ended the 44 Day War. Additionally, Azerbaijan continues to blatantly disregard and fails to comply with the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) legally binding decision on provisional measures issued on February 22, 2023, which ordered Azeri authorities to ensure free movement of goods and people through the Lachin Corridor.

The Lemkin Institute highlights that this blockade represents a clear existential threat to the 120,000 ethnic Armenians living in the breakaway area. Their lives are endangered by a hostile neighbor whose intentions are clear: to wipe out all traces of Armenian life and of an Armenian presence in this region. Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, has consistently and repeatedly stated that he intends to eradicate the indigenous Armenians dwelling in Artsakh. During the 2020 war he said, "If they don't leave on their own, we'll chase them out like dogs." He is supported in his genocidal pursuits by his Turkish counterpart, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Both countries aim to weaken Artsakh Armenians through these genocidal threats, including the threats of starvation, exposure, and ethnically motivated violence, so that they are terrorized and leave their historical land. Let us remember that the region of Artsakh has been inhabited by a majority Armenian population throughout history despite the region's incorporation into various empires over the centuries. Local leadership, language, and culture has remained unshakably and profoundly Armenian.

The Western world continues to disregard the blockade of Artsakh and is granting Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev near complete impunity to do as he pleases with the 4000-year-old indigenous Armenian community that has never before been under

Azerbaijani control. The United States, which contains a significant population of Armenian-Americans and prides itself on its unwavering commitment and support for democracies such as Armenia, is turning a blind eye to the Azerbaijani dictatorship for geopolitical and resource reasons.

The Lemkin Institute fears that this position will lead the United States to sponsor a forcible “coordinated” transfer of the Armenian population of Artsakh to Armenia proper. The forced transfer of the Armenians of Artsakh would constitute a violation of the right to self-determination, a fundamental pillar of the current legal order of the international community, and a fundamental right that the Armenians of Artsakh have been exercising long before the 1991 referendum that finally established the appropriate political institutions for self-governance. Likewise, the forced transfer would also constitute—at the very least—the crime against humanity of deportation. It would also arguably fall within the definition of the crime of genocide, as it would imply applying measures that would cause the total eradication of the autochthonous/indigenous population of the land where they have built their cultural identity and traditions.

The Lemkin Institute wishes to call attention to and honor President Biden’s 2021 decision to recognize the Armenian Genocide. This marked an important step in removing the United States’s self-imposed gag-rule on genocide recognition and reversing the decades-long engagement in denialism. However, this recognition has not been accompanied by meaningful policy changes that reflect President Biden’s commitment to justice for victims of genocide. Relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey have remained unchanged, and in some cases have improved, despite this recognition and in spite of the continued violation of international norms, human rights conventions, and treaty obligations, on the part of both states. We note with particular concern the Biden administration’s decision to waive section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, which bans most U.S. military assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan.

The United States is home to up to 2 million patriotic Armenian-Americans, who display their commitment to fighting for the freedom, rights, and liberties of their fellow citizens on a daily basis. From the 1890s through the 1920s the United States offered a safe haven to tens of thousands of Armenian refugees from Ottoman Turkish massacres and genocide. The Near East Foundation (NEF), founded in 1915 and supported by US President Woodrow Wilson and US Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau, raised millions to dollars to save an estimated one million Armenians and other victims of the Armenian and Christian genocides during World War I. The NEF is one of the shining lights in the dark history of genocide and it would not have been possible without the initiative of the leaders and the generous citizens of the United States. It is a terrible betrayal of this history that the US now rewards the descendants of these survivors by

sending their taxpayer dollars to Azerbaijan so President Aliyev can murder their brothers and sisters with impunity. By releasing statements that ignore the wanton aggression, genocidal rhetoric, and horrific atrocity crimes of the dictatorial Azerbaijani regime, the United States has chosen to abandon Armenians as they stand on the precipice of another genocide.

The Lemkin Institute calls on the United States to immediately change its policy towards Azerbaijan in a way that reflects a commitment to peace, democratic values, and human rights. To do this, the United States must place clear pressure on Azerbaijan and Türkiye to draw back their ongoing aggression against Armenian life through targeted sanctions and other diplomatic measures drawn from existing genocide prevention toolboxes. This must be done before Armenia is forced to sign any 'peace' agreement that would place Armenians in Artsakh and in the Republic of Armenia at risk of further Azerbaijani aggression. Otherwise the the United States and your office risk being complicit in genocide, according to Article III(e) of the Genocide Convention. Any agreement brokered by the United States along with its Western allies that includes the de facto forcible displacement of Artsakhis to Armenia will amount to a plan for genocide and should be tried in an international court. The United States cannot afford to ignore another threatened genocide, especially not one that it can clearly act to prevent though the use of a clear-sighted diplomatic policy informed by the very genocide prevention strategies that it has helped to create.




**Dr. Elisa von Joeden-Forgey**

Founder-President

+1 267 251-7122

[Elisa.Von.Joeden-Forgey@keene.edu](mailto:Elisa.Von.Joeden-Forgey@keene.edu)



**Dr. Irene Victoria Massimino**

Founder-President

+1 317 820-407

[imassimi@iu.edu](mailto:imassimi@iu.edu)

**Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention**

[www.lemkininstitute.com](http://www.lemkininstitute.com)

[info@lemkininstitute.com](mailto:info@lemkininstitute.com)